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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to ascertain the reactions of viewers and legislators to a public television series, "Today in the Legislature," which presented videotaped segments of a nine-week session of both the Florida House of Representatives and Senate. The results showed that viewers felt the program was informative, that their understanding of the legislative process was enhanced by the program, and that they learned about what their specific legislators at the capital did. Ninety-four percent of the viewers felt the series was worthwhile. Eighty-five percent of the legislators and eighty-eight percent of the journalists were in favor of continuing the program. (KKC)

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PRELIMINARY REPORT

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REACTION AND EVALUATION OF "TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE" BY LEGISLATORS, CAPITAL PRESS AND THE PUBLIC*

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The program series TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE, produced by two public television stations, WJCT-TV, Jacksonville, and WFSU-TV, Tallahassee, was a unique experiment in both "government in the sunshine" and a modified television of record. The program was telecast on the state's eight public television stations. Public television video-taped the nine week proceedings of both the Florida House of Representatives and the Senate. Portable video-tape equipment was also utilized to record a variety of important committee meetings.

The format of the typical program generally included some introductory material by the hosts, and an up-date of the current status of bills both in committee and before the houses. Usually, the program concluded with an observation or comment by the senior member of the anchor team, Dr. Ralph Chandler, who focused upon some aspect of either the day's legislative activity or issues of more global interest in the democratic process. The majority of the program's ninety minutes consisted of unabridged sections of floor debate and committee hearings.

RESEARCH PROGRAM

To ascertain viewer reaction to the program, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's Communication Research Office contracted the Communication Research Center of Florida State University to perform a series of field studies. Using state-wide WATS lines, trained interviewers conducted a variety of opinion surveys. Reported first are the data of what is termed the

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"dailies." On almost every weekday from April 4, 1973 to June 7, 1973, samples were called in each of the seven Florida public television markets. (Tampa/St. Petersburg was considered a single market.)

DAILY VIEWING

During the first two weeks of the legislative session, TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE was telecast twice a week. Beginning with the third week of the session, telecasts of ninety minutes were broadcast over the state's public television stations each weekday evening. With the advent of the Watergate hearings (May 17, 1973), the program was cut to sixty minutes and telecast usually at seven, rather than ten, o'clock in most markets.

Throughout this period, telephone calls were conducted in seven public television markets. At the end of the session, there were 5,539 usable telephone interviews. The figures reported here are adjusted so that only respondents who reported being able to receive public television were analyzed. This, in effect, excludes the 25% of the sample who cannot receive public television. Most of these respondents were in Orlando and Pensacola, two cities which have weak UFH public television stations.

Viewing

Approximately 21% of those interviewed knew about the program's existence, while 14% watched at least one program. Tracking the audience throughout the two month session shows that the sharpest rise in viewing of TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE occurred when the public television stations began telecasting

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the Watergate hearings.

In general, viewing of the program was highest in the state capital, Tallahassee, and the university city of Gainesville. Looking at only metropolitan areas yields a conservative total of 1,290,000 households existing within the seven markets. Of this number, 110,706 homes viewed at least one telecast of TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE.

Known Viewers

At the completion of the legislative session, 276 viewers of the program series were re-interviewed. They were asked a variety of questions concerning their reactions to the program.

When asked if they thought the program had influenced or caused the legislators to do their work differently, these known viewers responded as follows: 28% said no, 54% replied yes, and 18% had no opinion.

When asked if they detected any political bias in the program, 79% of the known viewers responded no, while the remainder split between having no opinion and saying yes, there was a political bias (10 and 11% respectively).

A series of questions dealt with perceived learning from the series. When asked how informative the series was, 54% of the known viewer sample responded that the program was very informative; 31% said the program was fairly informative; seven percent said the program was only slightly informative; two percent replied it was not informative; and, the remaining five percent had no opinion.

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When asked if the program had increased their understanding of the legislative process, 67% replied that the series had increased their understanding, one percent said the series confused them, 28% replied the program had no effect upon their understanding of the legislative process, and four percent had no opinion.

Next, the viewers were asked if the program had increased their knowledge about what their specific senator or representative did at the state capitol. The responses were: no increase, 28%; confused them, one percent; know a little better what their legislator does, 42%; know a lot better, 25%; and, the remainder had no opinion. However, when asked if they could recall and name a bill being discussed on the program, 60% of the known viewers could not recall a bill, while 22% could name one, 10% named two, and eight percent named three or more. When asked if they could remember the names of the various program hosts and hostesses, only three percent of the sample could recall their names.

This portion of the questionnaire concluded by asking the viewers for the principal reasons they watched the program. When asked if they viewed TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE primarily for news about the activities of the state legislature, 34% responded yes, while 66% said no. Forty-one percent indicated they watched to learn about the legislature, while 59% did not view for this reason. Entertainment did not seem to be an important reason for viewing--only five percent of the viewers said they watched the program for entertainment (95% did not).

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Finally, when asked if time passing was a principal purpose or reason for viewing, 10% said yes and 90% said no.

Lastly, the sample was asked if they thought the series was worthwhile and should be continued. Ninety-four percent felt the series was worthwhile, four percent said it was not, and two percent had no opinion.

Panel Study

Before the program series TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE began, more than 1,100 interviews were completed throughout the state's seven public television markets. For purposes of this panel study, approximately one-third of the sample was resampled, proportionate to the market size, after the series was completed.

When asked if they had viewed at least one of the programs, 15% replied yes (approximately the same as found in our daily sweeps). When TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE viewers were asked if the newspaper ads (remembered by 16% of the respondents) had caused them to view, eight percent said yes. Three percent of the TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE viewers in the panel study had received a mailing, and 10% said the mailings had caused them to view, while four percent said both the ads and the mailings caused them to view.

For this sample, 48% felt the series caused the legislators to do their work differently, 23% said the program did not affect the legislators, and 30% had no opinion. When asked if the program displayed any political bias, 14% said yes, 37% said no, and 49% had no opinion. Finally, when asked if

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the program was worthwhile and should be continued, 22% had no opinion, 10% said the program should be discontinued, and the remaining 68% said the program should be continued.

LEGISLATOR AND JOURNALIST RESPONSES

CONCERNING PROGRAM EFFECTS

	Legislator Responses	Journalist Responses
Did the quartz lights bother the legislators?		
Bothered them throughout series	47%	40%
Bothered them only at first	13%	36%
Did not bother them at all	39%	16%
No opinion	1%	8%
Did the cameras bother the legislators?		
Bothered them throughout series	1%	4%
Bothered them only at first	4%	20%
Did not bother them at all	93%	68%
No opinion	2%	8%
Did the equipment affect the legislators' behavior?		
No effect	30%	8%
Affected some legislator's behavior	55%	76%
Affected every legislator's behavior	13%	16%
No opinion	2%	-
Should the series excerpts be edited and/or with comments?		
No editing-no evaluation	56%	20%
Editing-no evaluation	14%	4%
Editing and evaluation	12%	60%
Other suggestions	8%	8%
No opinion	11%	8%

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Legislator and Journalist Responses
Concerning Program Effects (2)

	Legislator Responses*	Journalist Responses*
Do you think television coverage of TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE was boring?		
Boring	5%	8%
Some of it boring	17%	64%
Not boring	59%	4%
No opinion	19%	24%
Did the series deal with the surface events of the legislature or did it deal with it in depth?		
In depth	44%	24%
Just the surface events	39%	60%
Other answers	--	8%
No opinion	17%	8%
	(N=140)	(N=25)

* 140 legislators/25 journalists

LEGISLATORS

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One hundred forty members of the Florida legislature were interviewed by telephone.* When asked if they had watched the program, 17% replied no, 69% classified themselves as light viewers, and 13% as regular viewers (defined as viewing three or more times a week).

Lights and Cameras

The lighting system for TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE was the subject of much comment. Banks of bright quartz lights in the ceiling were in operation throughout the daily sessions. When asked about the lights, 47% of the legislators said the lights had bothered them throughout the whole session, while 39% replied that the lights did not bother them at all. The remaining members, 13%, replied that the lights bothered them at first but that they got used to them.

It was a different story in terms of the television cameras unobtrusively located in the corners of the various chambers. A large majority of the legislators, 93%, said the cameras did not bother them.

Behavioral Effects

When asked if the presence of the cameras and lights affected their behavior, the legislators offered some interesting replies. Approximately 30% felt the cameras and lights made no difference in their floor behavior, while 51% said the equipment affected others but not themselves. This left

* The completion ratio for this Legislator Study was 88%.

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four percent who said they noted behavioral changes in themselves, but not in others. Finally, 13% said the presence of the equipment affected everyone. Two percent held no opinion on this matter.

Given this complex reply, a summary is in order. The key point is that about one-third of the members felt that the television equipment did not affect the behavior of the legislators. If one considers that 51% felt that the equipment bothered others but not themselves, the sum is approximately 80% who report no difference for themselves. This leaves approximately 20% of the legislators who note some personal behavioral change.

When asked specifically what type of behavioral change ocurred, 44% could name no specific kind of change, 37% said the television equipment led to more talking by the members, while 15% felt it led to less talking. Four percent said the coverage made them nervous.

Evaluation of the Series

Recall that this series was not television of record (e.g., the televised Watergate hearings), but rather a modified version. Large slices of the program content were unedited segments of floor and committee debate. When asked if future programs should include editing and evaluation of legislative events, 56% of the legislators responded that they preferred unedited versions with no evaluations, 14% desired editing but without evaluation, while 12% preferred some type of editing and evaluation. Eighteen percent had no opinion on evaluation and editing.

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When asked if the producers were fair and balanced in their selection of the issues telecast, 66% said yes, while 27% of the legislators had no opinion and the remaining six percent said no.

Critics of this type of programming often assert that it is boring and dull. Only five percent of the legislators felt the coverage was boring, while 17% felt that some of the coverage was boring. However, 59% of the legislators felt that the television program was not boring and 19% said they held no opinion on the matter.

When asked if such television coverage conveyed only surface events and missed the more important elements of the legislative process, 39% of the legislators agreed. However, 44% of the legislators felt the coverage was in depth, while the remaining 17% held no opinion.

Constituent's Reaction

Approximately three-fourths of the legislators interviewed reported that their constituents had discussed the program with them. Most contacts were positive about the program: 66% of the legislators report generally positive comments, two percent report negative, six percent report mixed comments, while 25% of the legislators could not remember the evaluative tone of their constituents' replies.

A series of questions dealt with what the legislators thought their constituents' perceptions of the legislative process were as a result of the program. However, a large number of

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the legislators held no opinion concerning the questions. Most legislators, when they could answer the questions, were positive. Thus, when asked, "Did the program have a positive or negative impact on your constituency's support of you?", no impact was 16%, negative impact was one percent, and positive impact was 58%, with mixed impact being four percent, while the remaining 21% were don't know replies. When asked if the program resulted in positive or negative evaluations of the legislative process, eight percent felt the program had no impact, four percent felt it had a negative impact, 72% felt it had a positive impact, four percent felt it had a mixed impact, and the remaining 12% held no opinion on the matter.

Finally, when asked if they were in favor of continuing the program series next session, 85% of the legislature said yes, six percent said no, and four percent were unsure. The remainder (five percent) held no opinion. The program was refunded for the coming session

CAPITAL PRESS CORPS

Of particular interest is the reaction of the Capital Press Corps which covered the legislature and had to co-exist with the TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE production staff. Twenty-five of the thirty-two newspeople responded to the questionnaire.

When asked if they viewed the program, 17% of the reporters said no, 68% said they viewed occasionally, and 16% were regular viewers.

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Perceived Legislator Reactions

Since some of the reporters had filed stories dealing with the irritation caused by the lights and related television equipment, we asked the reporters the same series of questions as we had asked the legislators concerning lights and cameras.

When asked if the lights had bothered the legislators, 16% of the newspeople said the lights had not bothered the legislators, 36% said they had bothered the legislators at first but that the legislators got used to the lights, while 40% said the lights bothered the legislators throughout the session. The remaining eight percent of the newspeople had no opinion.

When asked if the cameras had bothered the legislators, there was a substantial difference in reported perceptions between the legislators and the reporters. Whereas 93% of the legislators reported the cameras did not bother them, only 68% of the reporters perceived the cameras in the same manner. Twenty percent of the reporters felt the cameras had bothered the legislators at first, but that they acclimated to the camera's presence.

When asked how the lights and cameras affected the legislator's behavior in the session, the reporters had far different perceptions than the legislators. While 80% of the lawmakers reported no change in their behavior, only eight percent of the reporters said they had perceived no change in behavior. The major difference in opinion came in

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the estimated number of legislators who displayed some behavioral effects. The reporters said that two-thirds of the legislators exhibited some change.

When asked what type of behavior resulted from the presence of the cameras, we can summarize briefly the reporters' comments. Some reporters, 40%, felt that television coverage resulted in more debate, while 20% felt it also resulted in better attendance. When asked specifically if the legislators grandstanded for the television cameras, 44% of the reporters replied yes, 32% of the reporters felt that only a few legislators grandstanded rather than all of them. Eight percent said there was no more grandstanding than usual present. Twelve percent said no grandstanding occurred and four percent held no opinion.

Program Evaluation

Approximately 44% of the reporters were positive about the program, 36% had mixed (positive-negative) perceptions and a large 20% had no opinion.

When asked if the program should telecast unedited excerpts with no evaluation, the reporters differed from the legislators. A majority of the reporters, 60%, wanted the segments to be edited with evaluation.

The reporters were a little more likely to perceive the series producers to be fair and balanced in their selection of issues than the legislators (72% versus 66% for the legislators).

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When asked if the program was boring, eight percent of the reporters said yes, 64% said it was boring some of the time, and 28% had no opinion.

As would be expected, the reporters were a little more critical of the type of coverage telecast by the programs, especially in comparison to the legislators. Sixty percent of the reporters felt the program gave only the surface of the legislative process, versus 39% of the legislators who felt the same. Approximately 24% of the reporters agreed that the program did furnish in depth coverage, contrasted with 44% of the legislators who agreed.

When asked if the program should be continued, 88% of the reporters agreed, with the rest expressing unsure or don't know responses.

SUMMARY

Of those interviewed in the seven public television markets, 14% of the sample watched at least one program of the TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE series. Among the legislators, 82% indicated they viewed the program, while 84% of the Capital Press Corps said they watched TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE at least once.

Responses to the program indicated a positive evaluation. Viewers felt the program was informative, that their understanding of the legislative process was enhanced by the program, and that they learned about what their specific legislators do at the Capitol. Ninety-four percent of the viewers felt the series was

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worthwhile. Of the total sample interviewed for the panel study, only 10% felt the program should be discontinued. Eighty-five percent of the legislators and 88% of the journalists were in favor of continuing the program.

One critical issue concerns effects of such programming on the legislators. However, responses indicate the negative effects of TODAY IN THE LEGISLATURE were perhaps minimal. About half of the Florida public sample, while 92% of the journalists and 68% of the legislators felt the program caused some of the legislators to do their work differently. In terms of kinds of effects, legislators note more debate (37%). Similarly, 40% of the Capital News Corps felt the program caused more debate. Some grandstanding was noted by both the journalists and legislators. However, in noting the reactions of everyone interviewed, the positive effects of the program seem to outweigh the negative.

This non-technical summary precedes the issuance of our more detailed analysis of the data later this spring.